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The New Machiavelli: How to wield power in the modern world

LSE Ideas

By Jonathan Powell

In his new book, Jonathan Powell, Tony Blair's chief of staff for thirteen years, takes Machiavelli's lessons on how to take power and hold on to it and explores if they still apply to modern politics and leadership.

Machiavelli empirically derives his maxims in 'The Prince' and 'The Discourses' from his experience of fifteenth century government and diplomacy. In my book, I try to do the same drawing on my diaries from 1997-2007 and the experience of the Blair government and the Clinton and Bush administrations. There are plenty of books on the theory of British government but almost none on the practice. This book endeavours to be a handbook to how to wield power.

Machiavelli is misunderstood and 'Machiavellian' has been an insult since the sixteenth century. But Machiavelli was not in fact 'Machiavellian'. He neither advocated evil nor brutality for its own sake. What he did do was break through the idealised universe of St Augustine which had dominated thinking up to that point. It is his stark realism that makes him the first modern. He argued that if rulers try to live by myths they are 'more likely to destroy than to save' themselves.

I argue that British politics is riddled with dangerous myths. The idea of Cabinet government in Britain is a misleading notion peddled by retired mandarins. If it ever existed, it died when Mrs Thatcher became prime minister and will never be resuscitated because a gathering of twenty five people, many of whom know nothing about the subject under discussion, will never be the right place to make decisions about complex policy issues. Criticism of 'sofa government' is misplaced and falls into the traditional trap of the British civil service of mistaking form for substance.

The book describes coming into office in 1997 and the illusory nature of power. Far from power being over centralised in No 10 in fact the levers of government were not connected to anything. Tony Blair describes the machinery of government as a shiny Rolls Royce parked outside Downing Street that he is not allowed to drive. President Clinton says he hopes when he dies he can come back as someone with real power, like a member of a focus group in Macomb County Michigan.

Machiavelli views courage and intelligence as the crucial attributes of a great leader. By comparing the contrasting leadership styles of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown I've sought to illustrate the possibilities and pitfalls, and to emphasise the need for a leader to be both a chairman, setting a vision, and a CEO, capable of conducting government competently. I look at the court that surrounds leader, the wisdom of Machiavelli's rule that 'flatterers should be shunned' and describe how the position of chief of staff was created in Britain.

The central relationship in any government is that between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, the one controlling the jobs and the other the money. I argue that constructive tension between the two incumbents can be a good thing, but that the Blair government had much too much of a good thing from 1997 to 2007. The tense relationship between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown had real consequences for the conduct of government.

The book takes up Machiavelli's maxim that it is better to be feared than to be loved and looks at politics from 1997 to 2007 in this context, from the perils of reshuffles to the desperate attempts to avoid banning fox hunting. It is important to be strategic if leaders are to avoid being driven by events, as reflected the lessons that New Labour over-learned on spin and handling media moguls and the threat that scandals and inquiries pose for governments.

In the book I look at the lessons on Europe and the transatlantic relationship from Blair's experiences, including the failure to join the euro and the five wars fought while Blair was Prime Minister. The book concludes that all governments are brought down by hubris in the end and describes the final days of the Blair government. There are very few great prime ministers over the last hundred years, but I believe that Blair was one measured by Machiavelli's rule on the importance of enjoying 'fortuna' and having the instinct to take advantage of the opportunities that luck throws up. Whilst it is probably an impossible task to try to rehabilitate Machiavelli or get an honest reassessment of Blair at this stage, I would urge those in power to study Machiavelli and understand that there is such a thing as the art of government and it is not the same as the theory that dominates our text books.

Jonathan Powell served as Tony Blair's Chief of Staff throughout the former Prime Minister's tenure, and is a member of the LSE IDEAS Advisory Board.

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